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## CHINESE GRECO-BUDDHIST BRONZE HEAD

BY ERNEST GOVETT

IT is an interesting problem as to how the light of ancient Greek art penetrated the western confines of China in the seventh century, and why the reflection left great provinces unheeded and permeated little more than a single limited district on a secluded borderland separating teeming multitudes from sterile deserts. Are we really to attribute the credit to the stern Nestorians who sought solace from the persecution of Byzantium in spreading the mysteries of one Incarnation amongst the devotees of another? Did these missionaries cross the bleak mountains of Afghanistan from their Persian travels, or accompany their Tartar friends over the wilds of Turkestan; or are we to suggest that they travelled from Canton the full breadth of China, two thousand five hundred miles, to leave vestiges of the early Greek culture at the end of their journey only? No, we must certainly discard the Nestorian theory so frequently advanced, for apart from the physical difficulties confronting the Nestorian priests, the bigoted factions which supported, as those which opposed the doctrines of Nestorius, were sunk deep in an intellectual quagmire, and were more ready to destroy the sublime works of Greek art than to spread their fame. Indeed, the Nestorians were themselves more in want of general culture than the inhabitants of the great country whom they were presumed to educate.

Nor may we look to Rome as responsible for the Greek development, for under Roman dominion none but Scythian hordes ventured far into India during the first three hundred years of the Empire, and these certainly did not cross the Himalayas. We must then fall back on

the percolation of Grecian art influence through India, and this is, after all, the natural explanation, for the route to India was opened up from Greece after the exploits of Alexander, and examples of Greco-Buddhist art are found there which probably date from the first or second century B. C. That this slight influence only very gradually travelled northwards, and took a thousand years or nearly so to cross into Chinese Turkestan, is hardly surprising when we remember the extreme conservatism of Indian traditions, art, and customs, and the almost impassable tracks across the Himalayan range; and it is to be noted that the influence was still longer in extending to Japan, which was much more easy of access than the region of Khotan. But there is a feature which does not seem to have been hitherto observed, that definitely settles the point in favor of the passage of the Greco influence into China, across India, and this is that the type of Greek art which affected in turn India, China, and Japan is the same, namely, that of Scopas. This artist was the first to turn the general character of the Phidian head to use in the representation of particular expression. The examples of Greek art that filtered into India after the time of Alexander could only have been small works, and no doubt were mostly coins bearing heads of Alexander and others, which were all executed more or less in the manner of Scopas or Lysippus, the latter, indeed, following Scopas in respect of modification of the earlier art to indicate individual expression.

We need not inquire into the question as to why the Grecian influence upon Chinese art lasted only for one century



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Period of the first century of the T'ang dynasty

or less, except to discard a recent suggestion that it was disturbed by Mahomedan proselytism, for it must have been long after the first century of T'ang that the creed of Mahomet was heard of beyond the Himalayas. It is to be observed that there have been several corresponding outbursts of Greek art influence which grew and died in a hundred years or less, notably the Italian period which commenced with the maturity of Ghiberti and died with that of Michelangelo, and the amazing revival of the thirteenth century in France. Two or three generations of Chinese sculptors saw the Grecian lamp flare up, and watched it flicker away. We must be satisfied with the results we have from it, looking confidently forward to masterpieces which the future may reveal.

So much is necessary by way of introduction to the consideration of this remarkable bronze head, a rare specimen of Greco-Buddhist art belonging to the small isolated district of Khotan, and to the period of the first century of the T'ang dynasty. The head is designed to fulfil the requirements of a figure of Bodhisatwa, an attendant of Buddha, who has reached the final incarnation of the great creed, typified by the flawless crystal. Devout contemplation is therefore the motive of expression, and this is brought about by the skilful aid of semi-sunken eyes, a direct modification of the beetling eyebrows first introduced as an aid to particular expression by Scopas. The eyelids are partly contracted over prominent eyeballs, conformably with the Chinese idea of representing intensity of thought, and the direction of the gaze is earthwards, to signify the concentration of reflection upon things appertaining to the purification of the soul. The nose and its relation to the forehead, the lines of the cheeks, the mouth, and the chin are purely

Greek; and excepting for the ears, which are lengthened close against the head to express dignity in the Chinese fashion, one might have thought from a front view that the work had been executed by a Greek artist. The hair, which is unobservable from the front on account of the crown, is gathered up from both sides and at the back to a chignon on the top of the head, a method adopted at the time in Japan as well as China for corresponding statues. The high crown is exceedingly interesting, not so much because of its shape, which was not unusual at the time, but on account of the separated spirals with which it is patterned, and which to the knowledge of the writer are found on no other early example of Chinese sculpture. They are purely Greek in origin, and are often seen either separated or evolved on fifth century B. C. painted Greek vases.

As indicated the bronze head obviously belonged to a standing figure of a Bodhisatwa which was placed on each side of a seated Buddha to form a temple trinity. Masculine or feminine, who knows? Nor does it matter, for the figure, symbolising spiritual perfection apart from earthly form or sex, is to call to mind the soul alone, and has an equal affinity with all members of the human race. Some artists give the figure a suggestion of the masculine, and others, particularly in later times, are inclined to emphasize feminine attributes, but all have one supreme end in view—to symbolise one who has fought the good fight through successive incarnations, and with soul completely purified has reached the confines of Nirvana. Though wrapped in profound meditation the Bodhisatwa sees all, knows all, and sheds the lustre of a spotless soul upon all human beings who seek inspiration and light to guide them along the Noble Path trodden by Buddha.